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## What's in a Name? The Historical Significance of Norse Naming Strategies in the Isle of Islay

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*Communities of Old Norse-speakers arriving in the Inner Hebrides during the Viking Age would have had two main choices when it came to naming their new environment. They could either adopt the names already in use by the native Celtic populations, or create new ones using their own language and naming traditions. Where they can be identified, comparative analysis of the adopted and new material offers a welcome opportunity to add narrative detail to an otherwise document-starved period of Hebridean history. This chapter will explore the specific evidence for Norse naming strategies in the Isle of Islay, and what this might reveal about Norse-native relations during the period of colonisation.*

### Introduction

On Friday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1266, the Norwegian nobles Askatinus and Andreas appeared on behalf of Magnús the fourth in the church of the brothers at Perth before Alexander the third, king of Scots. Their task was to cement the fledgling peace between Norway and Scotland, which had taken root since the death of Magnús' father, Hákon, in Kirkwall some three years earlier on his return from the Battle of Largs. The deal was simple. If the Scots left Orkney and Shetland alone, and agreed to pay a lump sum and annuity in refined silver, the Norwegians would, in return, amicably and socially, concede, resign and quit claim for Magnús and his heirs, either as suitors or possessors forever the '[Isle of] Mann, with the other islands of the Soders and all the other islands of the south and west part of the great Haffue'.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the treaty entered into on that day also entailed that any offences perpetrated between Magnus and Alexander, and their ancestors and their people were to be wholly remitted.<sup>2</sup> Just how far back this particular clause was intended to stretch is, of course, debatable. But it serves as an important reminder that unpleasantries had been a defining characteristic of Norse-native relations in this part of the world for centuries, from the havoc wreaked by Hákon and his placemen in the 1260s and 1230s,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver 1862, 211.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver 1862, 215.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson 1922, 471-8.

to the ‘Devastation of all the islands of Britain by heathens’ listed in the *Annals of Ulster* under AD 794.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of more comprehensive historical records, there has been a tendency to assume that Hákon’s later medieval enmity followed patterns of interaction established during the Viking Age. Victorian notions of the Vikings as restless adventurers, unfettered by the conventions of Christian morality, but hopelessly addicted to hit and run raids on defenceless monasteries, may no longer play such a large part in that assumption. But with the heritage language of the Western Isles being Scottish Gaelic and not Scandinavian, there has been a lingering reluctance to accept that the area was ever seen as anything more than a waystation by opportunistic Viking warlords *en route* to richer pickings around the Irish Sea. The trope of ‘seasonal exploitation’ has been especially resilient, stressing that the majority of Scandinavian visitors to the Hebrides during the Viking Age were fundamentally transient, and concerned only with ‘seasonal exploitation’ rather than permanent settlement.<sup>5</sup> However, where the analysis of the early Norse-native interface has been widened to take in other sources of evidence, such as material culture and genetics, it soon becomes clear that the Norse impact on local culture was both deep-reaching and long-lasting. Recent additions to the archaeological, linguistic and place-name evidence for Scandinavian activity in the formerly Pictish Outer Isles, for example, have revealed a level of cultural disjuncture in the 9<sup>th</sup> century that cannot be satisfactorily explained without the invasion and permanent settlement of large numbers of ethnic Scandinavians.<sup>6</sup>

Further south, on the other hand, where the lack of new archaeological material has been palpable, the historical narrative remains surprisingly under-developed. In the islands between Argyll and Ireland, the apparent survival of the native Gaelic language from the early Historic Era to the later Middle Ages continues to underpin a ‘North Vs South’ divide in Scottish Viking Studies, predicated on the assumption that ‘extirpation’ in the North gave way to ‘integration’ in the South. As with previously held views on the Outer Isles, a narrow evidential focus and agenda-driven presumption of cultural continuity have seen the discussion stagnate. To help redress the epistemological balance, this chapter will review what might have happened when Viking settlers came to the Inner Hebridean island of Islay, in the far southwest of the archipelago, through the lens of local place-names.

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<sup>4</sup> *Annals of Ulster* 794.7.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolaisen 2001 122–4, 1969, 16–7, but cf. 1977–80, 112. See also Sveas-Andersen 1991; Barrett 2008, 413.

<sup>6</sup> Smith 2001; Kruse 2005; Jennings & Kruse 2005, 2009; Macniven 2013.

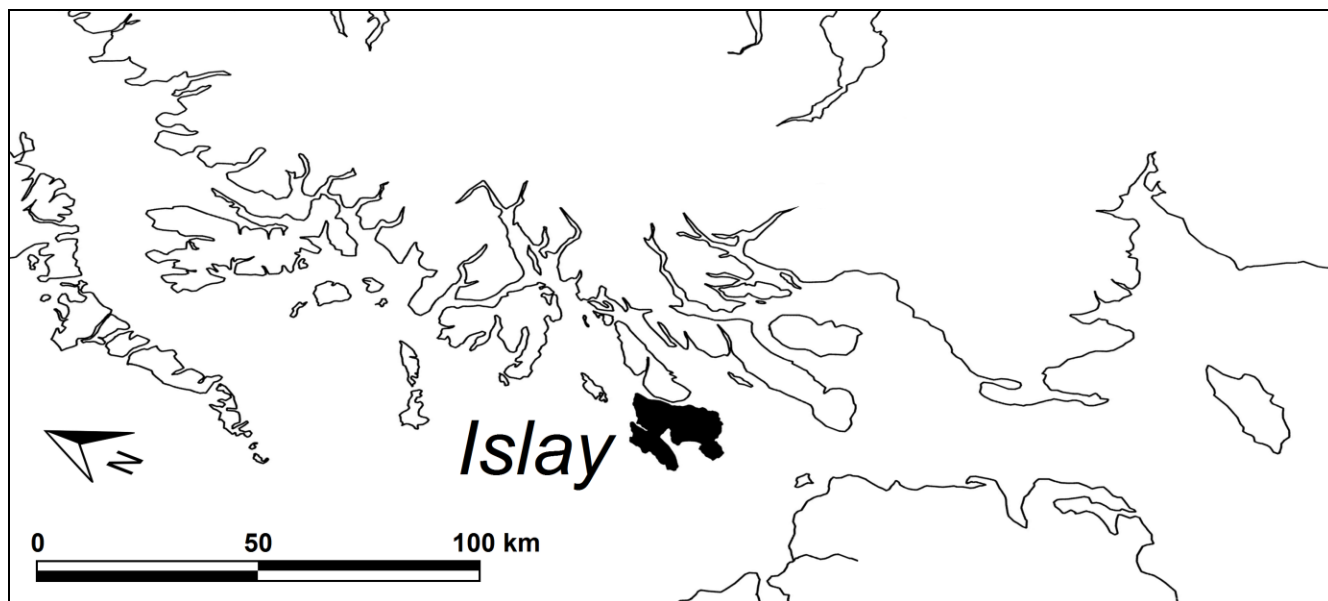


Figure 1: The Isle of Islay

### The Vikings in Islay

But what do we know about Islay and its Viking experience? Was it peaceful, predatory, piecemeal or over-powering? Can we even be sure that the Vikings ever actually went there? If we were to rely on the documentary evidence alone, none of those questions could be answered with certainty. Between AD 740 and 1095,<sup>7</sup> there are no contemporary references to the island itself, let alone the people or events which might otherwise have helped to define its cultural or political identity. There are several folk-tales suggesting early connections with Scandinavia. Peggy Earl notes one example deriving the island-name Islay from a mythical ‘Danish’ princess named Jula; and another recounting the slaying by Manx king Godred Crovan of a dragon on a hill at Imerchonart.<sup>8</sup> A third, well-known story remembers a battle between the ‘Fenians’ and the ‘Danes’ on a hillside called Sliabh a’Chatha (Gaelic for ‘Battle Brae’) near Gartmain on Loch Indaal.<sup>9</sup> But as all three can be read as simple literary tropes, it would perhaps be unwise to stress their value in historical research.

An alternative if less reliable way to cultivate the historical record is to begin with accounts of a later period and extrapolate backwards. Scandinavians are known to have been visiting Islay for a long time.

<sup>7</sup> *The Annals of Ulster* record an earthquake in Islay under 740.3; and the *Chronica Regum Manniae et Insularum: Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, Part I §23, record the death, in Islay of the Manxking, Godred Crovan in 1095.

<sup>8</sup> Earl nd, 1, 18.

<sup>9</sup> CANMORE (The online catalogue to Scotland’s archaeology, buildings, industrial and maritime heritage <https://canmore.org.uk/>) Site Number, NR36SW 10, accessed 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016.

These days, it is mainly to enjoy the opportunities for golf or, more likely, malt whisky. In times gone by, however, the standard itinerary seems to have demanded a certain amount bloodshed. By the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the island had been a named part of Christian Norway's cognitive geography for the best part of 300 years. In the late 1220s, for example, the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson was eager to assert himself in the Suðreys. With his Manx counterpart, Óláfr Guðrøðarson (Olaf the Black), proving unable to control its various warring factions, Hákon saw his chance to step in and make the territory his own. To do so, he installed Hebridean warlord Óspakr Ögmundarson, also known as Uspak Hákon and Gille Escoib mac Dubgaill, and thought to be a grandson of Somerled MacGillebride,<sup>10</sup> as king of the Hebrides, providing him with a fleet of 80 ships to oust Olaf. The story is told in Sturla Þórðarson's near contemporary biography of Hákon, *Hákonar saga Hákonarson*. According to Sturla, Uspak gathered his fleet in the Sound of Islay in 1230, in preparation for an attack on Bute. While in the Sound, he was joined by his brothers, Dugald and Duncan, and their relative Somerled, whose generous display of hospitality towards the Norwegians included the provision of what is described in the saga as *sterk vín*. Although this phrase is invariably translated as 'strong wine',<sup>11</sup> it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that what the Islesmen were, in fact, imbibing was an early form of *uisge beatha*, Gaelic for whisky, or the 'water of life'. Whatever the case, the Norwegian contingent in Uspak's fleet are said to have been apprehensive of the drink on offer, not necessarily because of an innate sense of moderation, but to avoid being rendered insensible and duped. This turned out to be a wise move. Retaining both their sobriety and their wits, the Norwegians quickly turned the situation to their advantage, dispatching the local trouble makers, including most of Uspak's relatives, without losing a man, and helping to precipitate a split in the Kingdom of the Isles in the process.

Uspak's expeditionary force is one of several Scandinavian fleets known to have visited Islay during the Christian Middle Ages. The list also includes Hákon's personal expedition through the Isles in 1263, in which he received the support of Angus of Islay, the chief of Clan Donald and progenitor of the later Lords of the Isles.<sup>12</sup> Prior to this, the island had also featured as a stop on Magnús *berfættr* (Barefoot) Ólafsson's pyromaniacal trail of destruction in 1098, in which he sailed from Norway to Dublin to secure his overlordship of the area in the face of Scots expansion.<sup>13</sup> According to Björn *krepphendis* (Cripple Hand's) skaldic poem *Magnúsdrápa*, around which Snorri Sturluson structured

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<sup>10</sup> Sellar 2000, 194, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson 1922, 475.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson 1922, 102-118.

<sup>13</sup> *Magnúss saga berfætts*.

his early 13<sup>th</sup> century *Magnúss saga berfætts*, Magnús is said to have caused smoke to be raised over Islay and devastated several others in a successful bid to assert himself.<sup>14</sup>

Given the known economic and strategic importance of Islay in the later Iron Age and Early Historic Era, it would be surprising if Hákon or Magnús were the only Scandinavian sea-kings to have coveted its gifts. While there are no surviving accounts of any earlier, pagan interaction, it is clear that Norwegian Vikings must have sailed very close to the island on their way to documented raids on the monasteries of Iona and Rathlin, or their ventures further south into Ireland and the Irish Sea.<sup>15</sup> The strategic value of Islay's location as a safe haven between the whirlpool of the Corryvreckann and the dangerous tidal currents of the North Channel should not be underestimated in this respect. Whether it was also visited by semi-fictional saga characters such as Harald *hárfaðri* (fairhair) Halfdanarson or Ketill *flatnefr* (flatnose) Björnson in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, is not known for certain. But if the general manoeuvrings associated with them are accepted, it would be reasonable to imagine that they involved Islay and helped to establish a precedent for later visitations.

While the military occupations of Islay in the late 11<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century were short-lived affairs, it is important to remember that they were the actions of centralised Norwegian kings. As eager as Hákon or Magnús may have been to be seen at the forefront of high profile naval campaigns, they were also keen to move on afterwards, delegating the process of consolidation to local underlings, a *modus operandi* unlikely to have been shared by the more hands-on warlords of the Viking Age. For pagan Scandinavian chieftains, the key to secular authority appears to have been the personal support of landed neighbours rather than divine anointment. Elsewhere in the North Atlantic, for example, establishing a strong local presence through the large-scale plantation of settlers seems to have been an important part of overseas expansion.<sup>16</sup> In those parts of Scotland's northern and western seaboard for which evidence is relatively abundant, invasion, colonisation and cultural obliteration appear to have been the order of the day.<sup>17</sup>

Without closer consideration of the wider context, this kind of development is difficult to reconcile with the apparent survival of the Gaelic language in Islay. But with the island itself having completely

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<sup>14</sup> *Eg Magnúss saga berfætts*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Ó'Corráin 1998a, 1998b; Downham 2007.

<sup>16</sup> **Steinslund.**

<sup>17</sup> Smith 2001; Jennings & Kruse 2005, 2009a, 2009b. Macniven 2013.

disappeared from the documentary record for the duration of the Viking Age, it cannot simply be assumed that business continued as usual. In the preceding period, Islay is known to have been home to the powerful Dalriadan *cenél nOengusso*, one of the leading families of Gaelic-speaking Dál Riata. In the years after the Viking Age, it was to re-emerge as the seat of the Argyll derived MacSorley Kings of the Isles.<sup>18</sup> Things had clearly changed in between. And where better to look to for the agents of that change than boatloads of pagan Scandinavian settlers?

This is what seems to be suggested by the archaeological material. Confirmed remains from Islay's documentary hiatus are limited to a selection of portable objects, which can hardly be considered representative of everyday life (Figure 2). But it is worth noting that all of them are not only diagnostically Scandinavian, but of the high-status variety which points to the existence of a settled pagan elite.<sup>19</sup> With all of the material having been found on or close to areas of high quality and easily worked arable land, it can also be assumed that the same Scandinavians controlled the local subsistence economy. Saying for certain what this material might signify in the absence of contextualising documentary evidence is difficult. Considering the tens of thousands of Scandinavian pioneers, who together with their families, friends, servants and slaves are known to have emigrated to the effective 'new world' of Iceland in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the most straightforward explanation is the takeover, and settlement of large numbers of ethnic Scandinavians.<sup>20</sup> Without the corroboration of more openly descriptive sources, or more comprehensive archaeological discoveries, the only realistic way of testing this theory lies in the closer scrutiny of the local names of places.

### Islay Place-Names

At around 62,000 Ha, Islay is the fifth largest of Scotland's islands, around 25% smaller than Mull, but 15% larger than Orkney Mainland.<sup>21</sup> The population may have declined to 3,228 in the most recent census in 2011, from 3457 in 2001, and a historic high of 15,772 in 1841.<sup>22</sup> But its richly varied landscape of machair, mountains, farmland and freshwater bogs, continues to support around 6,000 settlements, natural features and other locations distinct enough to be recognised with an officially recorded name.<sup>23</sup> While the percentage of names from a Scots English language background, which

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<sup>18</sup> Macniven 2015, 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> Macniven 2015, 61-3, 109-110.

<sup>20</sup> Karlsson 2000, 11, 44-51; Vésteinsson 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Haswell-Smith 1996, 35, 74, 292.

<sup>22</sup> Darling 1955, 83.

<sup>23</sup> McWee 2001.

includes house numbers and public utilities, has now grown to around 40% of the total, the remaining 60% can be considered formally Gaelic in the sense that they have for centuries been used, preserved and developed by the Gaelic-speaking community in accordance with the norms of local pronunciation and the demands of the Gaelic grammar system. However, there are many names for which this formal description does not sit well. For a number of writers, including Domhnall MacEacharna, their exotic character gives them an air of Romance, fully commensurate with the island's dramatic history.<sup>24</sup> Some of these names may sound Gaelic when spoken by the natives, and may even look Gaelic in their written forms, but make little sense when read as Gaelic word material. The hills known as Beinn Tart a'Mhill (NR 210 569, 232m) and Cnoc Garbh a'Mhill (NR 204 556, 120m) in the Rinns peninsula, for example, would have to be read as the somewhat contrived 'Hill of the Thirsty Hill', and 'Hill of the Rough Hill'.<sup>25</sup>

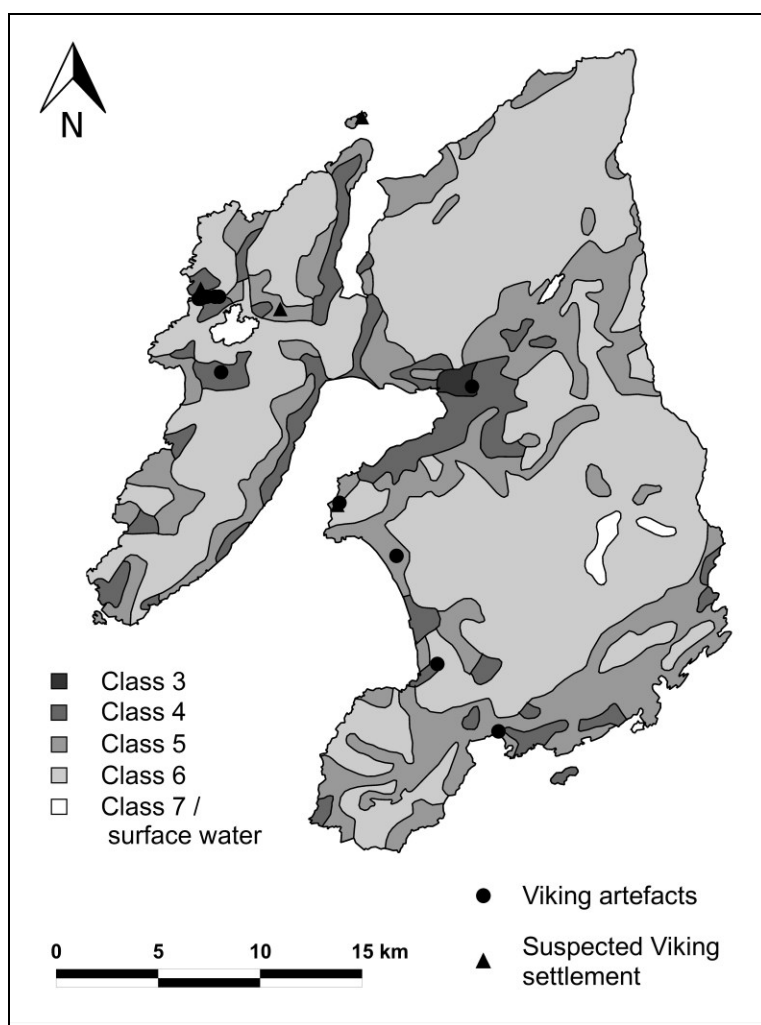


Figure 2: Viking Remains in Islay (adapted from Macniven 2015:46 & 62; Brown et al. 1982)

<sup>24</sup> Maceacharna 1976.

<sup>25</sup> Macniven 2015, 291-2, 341.



Many other Islay place-names contain elements which might be understood in terms of their descriptive connotations, and in some cases are still productive in naming practices, but which *cannot* have been drawn from Goidelic word-stock. This list includes several dozen naming elements such as *geodha* (m), *gil* (f), *sgarbh* (m) and *sgeir* (f). The reason is quite simply that this material is not, ultimately, Gaelic in origin, but Old Norse – the language of the Vikings. The *\*Tart a'Mhill* part of Beinn Tart a'Mhill, for example, finds easier origins in Old Norse *\*Hjartafjall*, or 'Stag Mountain', with *hjarta* being the genitive plural form of *hjörtr* (m), 'stag', and the transformation of initial /h/ into /t/ being a common feature of Gaelic adaptations of Old Norse place-names. Similarly, the *\*Garbh a'Mhil* part of Cnoc Garbh a'Mhill, makes more sense if it is seen as Norse *\*Skarfafjall*, from *skarfr* (m), meaning 'cormorant' or possibly *\*Skarðafjall*, meaning of 'Cleft Mountain'. Individual elements like *geodha*, *gil*, *sgarbh* and *sgeir* can be explained relatively easily as the Norse loan-words *gjá* (f) 'chasm, rift in crags', *gil* (n) 'deep narrow valley with river at the bottom', *skarfr* (m) 'cormorant' and *sker* (n) 'skerry, rock' in Gaelic clothing.<sup>26</sup>

It should be stressed that these observations are hardly new. As far back as 1772, the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant spent several days in Islay as a guest of the local gentry. What he learned there led him to observe that, 'There are more Danish or Norwegian names of places in this island than any other; almost all the present farms derive their titles from them, such as Persibus, Torridale, Torribolse and the like'.<sup>27</sup> This, however, is something of an exaggeration. At a generous estimate only around a fifth of Islay's modern inventory contains any obviously Norse elements, either as survivors from the Viking Age or loan-words which have remained active in local naming practices in the years since. But it does beg the important questions of how we know whether a name is Old Norse or Gaelic, and what, if anything this might tell us about social interaction between the incoming Norsemen and the native Gaels

## Philology

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a strong belief among language historians that all systematic changes in language could be reduced to a standardised series of discrete transformations. In Scotland, linguists including George Henderson, Alexander MacBain and others went to great pains to

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Stewart 2004, 408-16.

<sup>27</sup> *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772*, 220-1.

map out the systematic changes by which modern Gaelic place-names might have evolved from Old Norse originals.<sup>28</sup> Their approach was really quite straightforward. If a West Highland place-name was clearly not (Scots) English and could not reasonably be interpreted as Gaelic in its topographical context, they would then consider an Old Norse etymology. Perhaps surprisingly, the distinction between originally Goidelic and Scandinavian material is not always as easy to make as might be imagined. Take, for example, the three Islay examples of Corrary (NR 312 571, NR 324 455, NR 271 689), any or all of which could derive from either Old Norse *\*Káraærgi* (Kári's Shieling), or Gaelic *\*Corr Áirigh* (Shieling on the Round Hill).<sup>29</sup> Things get even more complicated with names like the now lost Calumsary in the Rinns, which appears to derive from both Old Norse and Gaelic elements – the originally Gaelic personal name Calum, and either the Gaelic generic *àirigh* (f) or its Old Norse counterpart *ærgi* (n) – in an Old Norse grammatical matrix.<sup>30</sup> Fortunately, there are a number of guiding principles that can help to establish the language background of individual names.

If the name in question comprises more than one element, the order of the elements can be diagnostic. In Gaelic, close-compound names tends to begin with a 'generic' element, describing the broad category of name, such as *baile* (m), meaning 'township or farm', or *tigh* (m), meaning 'house'. This is usually followed by the so-called 'specific' element, which adds distinguishing detail. In settlement names, this might be the main crop grown at the site, eg. Ballygrant (NR 395 662) from Gaelic *\*Baile a'Ghràin*, 'Townland of the (Kiln-Dried) Corn';<sup>31</sup> a comment on its terrain or topography, eg. Bailetarsin (NR 355 611) from *\*Baile Tarsuinn*, 'Township on the Slope', or Tigh nan Cnoc (NR 354 647) meaning 'House on the Hill';<sup>32</sup> or the name of the owner or tenant, eg. Balole (NR 355 661) from *\*Baile Ola*, 'Ola's Township'; or Tighcargaman (NR 363 495) from *\*Tigh Cargaman*, 'House of Cargaman'.<sup>33</sup> Compound Norse names, on the other hand, tend to consist of a specific element followed by a generic. Typical examples might include Cornabus (NR 334 464) from *\*Kornabólstaðr*, 'Corn Farm';<sup>34</sup> Sannaigmore (NR 237 707) from *\*Sandvík*, 'Sandy Bay';<sup>35</sup> and Olistadh (NR 218 583) from *\*Óláfsstaðir*, 'Óláf's Steading'.<sup>36</sup> It will be noted that the written forms of the assumed Old Norse material are rather different from the standardised spelling of the same concepts. This can be explained

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<sup>28</sup> Henderson 1910, MacBain 1922.

<sup>29</sup> Macniven 2015, 201-2.

<sup>30</sup> Macniven 2015:309, but see also p.39.

<sup>31</sup> Macniven 2015, 251-2.

<sup>32</sup> Macniven 2015, 195-6, 236-7.

<sup>33</sup> Macniven 2015, 252-3, 183.

<sup>34</sup> Macniven 2015, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Macniven 2015, 348-9.

<sup>36</sup> Macniven 2015, 344-5.

in part as linguistic drift during the centuries they spent as oral artefacts in the alien language environment of the later medieval *Gàidhealtachd* before being crystallised in writing.

To get as close as possible to the original Scandinavian forms, the effects of the Gaelic grammar system have to be taken into account. The impact of linguistic phenomena such as lenition, projection, back-formation and prosthesis, which are common in Gaelic, can radically alter the appearance of a word and have to be reversed in the reconstruction of earlier forms. In Islay, the ‘lenition’ of a word initial consonant appears to have transformed Old Norse *\*Turfnes* (NR 209 676: Turf Ness) into Aird *Thorrinnis* (Headland of *\*Thorrinnis*);<sup>37</sup> ‘Projection’ of the final consonant in a Gaelic definite article, such as *an*, would explain the development of Old Norse *\*Eyrabólstaðr* ((Gravel) Bank Farm) into *Nerabus* (NR 226 551);<sup>38</sup> ‘Back-formation’ of an assumed lenited initial consonant may have taken ON *\*Hánessker* to Eilean an *Tannais-sgeir* (NR 188 639);<sup>39</sup> while ‘prosthesis’ of a name with an extraneous /s/ or a /k/ might see *\*Karlsstaðir* (Karl’s Farm) or *\*Haraldsstaðir* (Harald’s Farm) transformed into *Skerrols* (NR 351 638).<sup>40</sup> Additionally, because the fixed first syllable stress of Norse word material is unusual in Gaelic, where stress is more commonly delayed to a later syllable, it can also lead to later elements simply disappearing, further complicating attempted etymology, eg. Thomas’ derivation of Skerrols from an unnecessarily complex Old Norse *\*Skúrhólarstaðir* ‘Trench Hill Farm’.

Having taken numerous such transformations into account, Henderson was able to devise a complex series of charts showing how vowels and consonant clusters might have been adapted from Norse into Gaelic in initial, medial and terminal positions.<sup>41</sup> There is no doubt that this linguistic ‘ready-reckoner’ is helpful in many individual cases. But it would be wrong to imagine that it can be applied uniformly and successfully in all circumstances to reveal the ‘factory-fresh’ versions of originally Old Norse material. Steady progress in the theory and practice of place-name research in Scandinavia over the intervening century has helped, with the refinement of the ‘historical-philological’ approach to place-name etymology stressing the value of interdisciplinary corroboration and the importance of real-world

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<sup>37</sup> Borgstrøm 1940, §80, 84; Oftedal 1956, 164-9; Thurneysen 1975, 74-89, 140-6; Cox 2002, 51-3; Stewart 2004, 405; Macniven 2015, 351-2.

<sup>38</sup> Cox 2002, 53; Macniven 2015, 339-40.

<sup>39</sup> Maceacharna 1976, 117 FN 17; Cox 2002, 64; Macniven 2015, 307.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas nd.; Macniven 2015, 232-3.

<sup>41</sup> Henderson 1910, 342-57.

comparators.<sup>42</sup> One particularly important observation is that the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of a given Old Norse place-name will not always be perfectly aligned to those reconstructed from the standard language. Even where words are known to have been in use, research has confirmed that the range of practical combinations is limited, that compounds can be formed with or without the use of standard Old Norse genitive markers, such as /-s/, /-ar/, /-u/, /-a/ or /-na/, and that it is quite possible to encounter plural forms where the singular might be expected, eg. *staðir* instead of *staðr*.<sup>43</sup>

From a philological perspective, it is also important to stress that the earlier Scottish approach to this material does not deal with the effect of language contact. It simply takes the modern Gaelic spelling for a name – which might have drifted considerably over the years – and tries to approximate it, not to the dialect of Old Norse used locally when the names were created, but to the modern, normalised forms of Old Norse devised by recent editors of the Icelandic sagas.<sup>44</sup> As a result, it leaves little room for the impact of dialectal variation or other linguistic anomalies on the eventual written forms of local place-names.

Marginalising the scope for localised developments in this way can pose difficulties in strict philological analyses. In Islay, this is demonstrated by recent treatment of the so-called ‘busses’,<sup>45</sup> the two dozen or so place-names still in use or preserved in old rentals and charters, which end in -bus, -bolls, -polls and Bolsa(y). Although these endings are widely believed to have evolved from Old Norse *bólstaðr* (m), meaning ‘farm’,<sup>46</sup> it has also been argued that they derive from a philologically convincing but otherwise unattested Old Norse *bólshagi*.<sup>47</sup> Accepting the possibility of local quirks, however, allows for an alternative explanation – a misunderstanding of the morphemic boundaries in originally Old Norse *bólstaðr* towards the end of the island’s Norse period, when active knowledge of the language among the settled population was rapidly disappearing in the face of encroaching Gaelic. Scrutiny of the written forms together with the local pronunciation suggests that the element came to be tacitly understood as a combination of two lexically empty morphemes, *\*ból*s + *\*taðr*, with the terminal /s/ of *\*ból*s being mistaken for a common genitive marker. Following the later operation of the Gaelic grammar system, in a nominally bi-lingual environment, this would then allow for the lenition

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<sup>42</sup> Rygh 1898, 4-8; Christensen & Kousgard Sørensen 1972, 119-60; Sandnes 2003, 109-11.

<sup>43</sup> Macniven 2015, 39-41.

<sup>44</sup> Pálsson 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Macniven 2015, 71-4.

<sup>46</sup> Gammeltoft 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Cox 1994.

of the initial /t/ in *\*taðr* to *\*aðr*, the loss of the terminal consonantal cluster due to syncope, and subsequent addition of the common Gaelic locative particle *aig*. Thus *bólstaðr* becomes ‘bussaig’ [β8ασtγΥ9].<sup>48</sup>

While the exact mechanisms of this particular transformation are open to debate, it is important to stress how unusually complex they seem to have been. Why the changes undergone by the other surviving Old Norse material appear to have been comparatively simple also requires an explanation. This can be found in the linguistic properties of names, and has important implications for how this material can contribute to the historical narrative.

### What’s in a name?

It has been known instinctively for many centuries that names in general are meaningless – empty labels which can be used as convenient shorthand for complex phenomena such as people or places. As they need only be understood as a series of sounds they can remain separate from standard word material, surviving the changes in grammar and fashion that might affect it over time, or even the replacement of the local language itself. Because of this, they also provide a convenient and resilient vehicle for the preservation through the ages of the actual words from which the names were originally coined. It is for this reason that Old Norse name material has been able to survive in the Gaelic speaking environment of Islay’s recent past. And it follows that by looking more closely at the context and format of that material, it should, in theory, be possible to comment on the relative status of Old Norse and Gaelic speakers on Islay, at the time or times when that name-material was created.

Following a period of societal destabilisation in the Hebrides in the opening decades of the Viking Age, leading to a Norse takeover by the 840s, it seems that large numbers of ethnic Scandinavians made their way to the Scottish islands.<sup>49</sup> Communities of Old Norse speakers arriving on Islay would have had two main choices when it came to naming their new environment – they could either adopt existing names or create new ones. These two over-arching strategies can be further broken down into a number of sub-categories.<sup>50</sup> When it came to borrowing existing names, for example, a process technically known as onomastic transfer, adoption could have taken several forms. If settlers found themselves in a socially subordinate position to the native population they are most likely to have learned and used the

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<sup>48</sup> Macniven 2015, 71-2.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Macniven 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Gammeltoft 2006.

established names of places – perhaps with minor adjustment for Old Norse pronunciation, known as ‘phonological adaptation’. In these circumstances, any such adaptations would soon have disappeared back into the dominant tradition, meaning they are unlikely to have left much trace. In Islay, the only definite example is preserved in the later medieval Icelandic sagas. The Latin *Ilea Insula* and the Old Irish *Íl* used to name the island in the pre-Norse period can be found adopted in *Magnúss Saga Berfætts* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarson* in the place-names *Íl* (Islay) and *Ílarsund* (Sound of Islay).<sup>51</sup> Contrary to what might be assumed, however, neither are likely to point to a low social status for the Norse settlers. Both can be satisfactorily explained as ‘exploratory’ names, adopted for basic utility without any clear need for deeper communication.<sup>52</sup>

Where the context of borrowing lacks meaningful communication, and names are not properly understood, phonological adaption can also be accompanied by lexical substitution, where the people doing the borrowing latch onto bits of the words that sound familiar, and tweak them to mirror those patterns, thereby making them easier to remember. To a monoglot speaker of modern English, for example, the Scottish Gaelic district name *Na h-Eileanan an Iar* (The Western Isles) might be rationalised aurally as ‘A nail in a jar’. While the Islay namescape boasts several highly conspicuous examples of lexical substitution from Old Norse names being transferred into Gaelic – it is clearly significant that there are as yet no convincing examples of Gaelic names being adapted into Old Norse in this way.

## New Names

The alternative to borrowing existing place-names, would have been to create new ones. Clearly, a glut of genuinely new Norse names would suggest that the social-standing of the incomers was elevated to the extent that they could simply ignore local tradition and establish their own. There appear to be many dozens of examples of this type of name in Islay, including settlements with habitative generics, such as Conisby (NR 62 619: from Old Norse *\*Konungsbyr*, ‘King’s Farm’),<sup>53</sup> and Cragabus (NR 326 451: from *\*Krakabólstaðr*, ‘Kraki’s Farm’),<sup>54</sup> settlements with topographic generics, such as Proaig (NR 457 576: from *\*Breiðvik*, ‘Broad Bay’),<sup>55</sup> and Stremnish(more) (NR 311 408: from *\*Straumnes*,

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<sup>51</sup> Gammeltoft 2007; Broderick 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Kruse 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Macniven 2015, 301-2.

<sup>54</sup> Macniven 2015, 149-50.

<sup>55</sup> Macniven 2015, 174-5.

‘Headland of the Current’);<sup>56</sup> and the names of major and minor natural features, such as Beinn Tart a’Mhill and Eas Forsa (NR 428677: from *\*Forsá*, ‘Waterfall River’) (Figure 3).<sup>57</sup> The distribution of this material across all parts of the island and all of its landforms suggests that the Old Norse speaking population, and place-name ‘user group’,<sup>58</sup> was not limited to marginal land or defensive enclaves.<sup>59</sup>

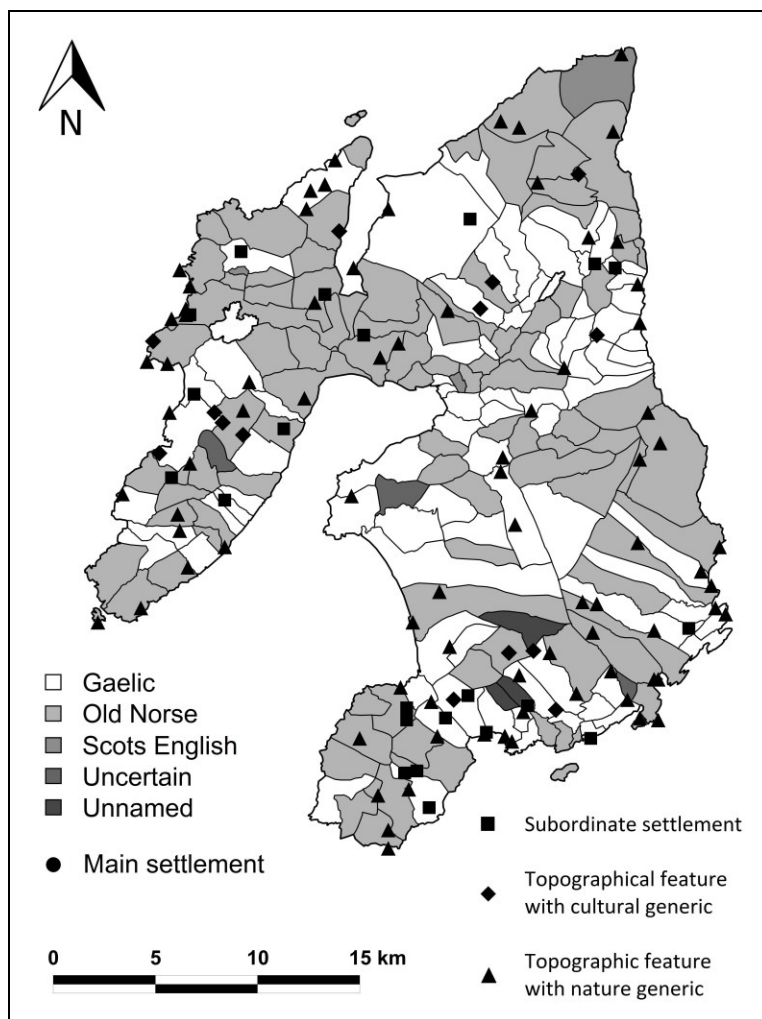


Figure 3: Distribution of likely Old Norse place-names in Islay (Adapted from Macniven 2015, 54)

It theory at least, however, it is hard to say whether some or all of this material might not represent adaptations of pre-existing Gaelic names. It is also possible that some of it has been created by a linguistically Gaelic community using a selection of heritage loan-words from Old Norse. Take, for

<sup>56</sup> Macniven 2015, 178-9.

<sup>57</sup> Macniven 2015, 257.

<sup>58</sup> See Magnus Olsen’s User Group theory, eg. Olsen 1934.

<sup>59</sup> cf. Níeke 1984, 313.

example, Crois Sgeir (NR199 614),<sup>60</sup> which could have originated in a later medieval Gaelic name meaning ‘The Skerry of/with the Cross’, or an earlier Old Norse *\*Krossker* meaning ‘Cross Skerry’ with or without any intended reference to any Christian ecclesiastical monuments. Ironically, it is precisely this difficult area that we find the final, but perhaps the most fruitful category of names in terms of commenting on Norse native relations – new names formed from existing name material with the addition of a new part, known as an epexegetic onomastic unit.<sup>61</sup> In Islay, there are numerous examples of this category, including Glean Egedale (NR 333 517: from Old Norse *\*Eikadalr*, ‘Oak Tree Valley’);<sup>62</sup> Port Borgarvik (NR 429 658: from *\*Borga(r)vik*, ‘Fort Bay’);<sup>63</sup> Eas Forsa to list but a few. Until recently, names of this type were routinely described in settlement historical studies as Gaelic-Norse ‘Hybrids’.<sup>64</sup> Although the term is still occasionally used in historical overviews, it is important to stress that it is neither linguistically accurate, nor particularly helpful. Rather than reflecting some strange Norse-Gaelic creole or pidgin language, such as the heavily accented Irish described as *gib gab* or *gic gac* said to have been spoken by Norse merchants in 10<sup>th</sup> century Ireland,<sup>65</sup> these names are, in fact, formally Gaelic – albeit Gaelic names which have been created from pre-existing Norse material. What their existence confirms is that the latter day use of Gaelic in Islay supersedes a period when an important part of the settled population spoke Old Norse. With this in mind, it is important to ask just how many pre-Viking Age, Gaelic names have survived in Islay. Apart from the name of the island itself, and possibly, although be no means certainly, a few others recorded in documents like the *Senchus fer nAlban*, with its assumed list of districts in Islay, <sup>66</sup> the answer, surprisingly, is none that we can be sure about.

### Dating the Gaelic Material

It was once argued that the relatively high concentration of the Gaelic generics *baile* (m) (township, farm), *cill* (f) (chapel, church, graveyard) and *sliabh* (m) (hillside, slope, mountain) in the Inner Hebrides pointed to their productivity in Dalriadan times, before Gaelic had spread to the Scottish mainland, and long before the arrival of the Vikings.<sup>67</sup> The implication that a significant part of the local namescape had remained unchanged throughout the Middle Ages has played a formative role in

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<sup>60</sup> Macniven 2015, 331.

<sup>61</sup> Cox 1988-9.

<sup>62</sup> Macniven 2015, 154-5.

<sup>63</sup> Macniven 2015, 273.

<sup>64</sup> Maceacharna 1976, 82-3; Olson 1983, 134-76.

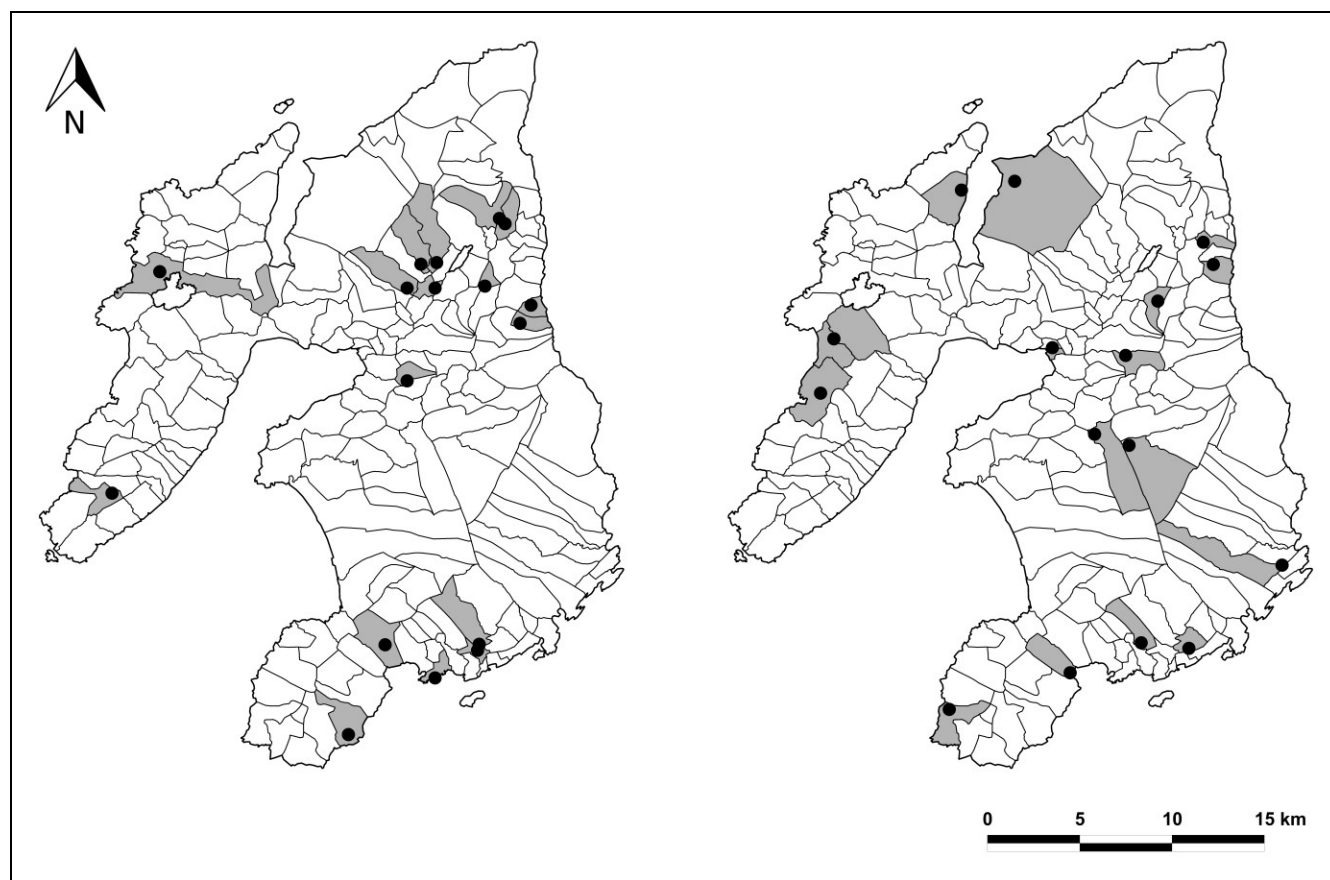
<sup>65</sup> Schulze-Thulin 1996, 111; Downham 2015, 375.

<sup>66</sup> Macniven 2015, 81-4.

<sup>67</sup> Nicolaisen 2001, 156-91.



assumptions of cultural and population continuity that are proving difficult to overturn. There are, however, good reasons to believe that distribution alone is not a particularly reliable guide to the antiquity of this material. In his investigation of the generic *baile*, for example, Liam Price established that while the word was used as a simple noun in Irish texts the pre-Norse period, its occurrence in place-names was extremely uncommon until the later Middle Ages, when it is likely to have been developed to meet the needs of the ecclesiastical and secular authorities.<sup>68</sup> A similar study of *sliabh* names in the Rhinns of Galloway by Simon Taylor concluded that the concentration of the generic in the southwest could also point to a later antecedence.<sup>69</sup> In Islay, it seems that the widespread distributions of both *baile* and *cill* names are the results of administrative reforms by Oláfr Guðrøðarson of Man, Somerled MacGillebride or his son Ranald, such as the introduction of the parish system, or the introduction of written standards in book-keeping (Figure 4).<sup>70</sup>



**Figure 4: Distribution of Gaelic *baile* (LHS) and *cill* (RHS) in the farm-names shown on Stephen MacDougall's (1749-51) *Map of the Island of Islay* (Adapted from Macniven 2015, 66, 68)**

<sup>68</sup> Price 1963. See also Flannagan 1978.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Macniven 2015, 64-9.

In establishing the age of individual Gaelic place-names in the Hebrides, more progress has been made by focussing on aspects of grammar and syntax than distribution patterns. Much has been made of syntax, with names containing forms of the definite article in medial position, such as Tighandrom (NR 373 461: from Gaelic *\*Tigh an Droma*, ‘House on the Ridge’) likely to be later medieval developments, and those with the article in the initial position, such as An Lossit (NR 412 655: from *\*Losaid*, ‘Kneading Trough’) perhaps even younger.<sup>71</sup> In Islay, these types of name account for about a third of the total Gaelic name-pool – pointing to a significant redevelopment of the inventory in the relatively recent past, and allowing for the large-scale replacement of the local Norse toponymy of the Viking Age.

Of the remainder of Islay’s Gaelic place-names, it is possible that some are ancient survivals. As with the exploratory names discussed earlier, however, that does not point to meaningful communication between Norse and native, simply their utility in the exploitation, apportionment and management of landed resources. Moreover, with numerous waves of Gaelic-speaking immigration known to have swept over Islay since the Viking Age – following the arrival of Somerled MacGillebride from Argyll in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century; the cultural cross-fertilisation with the North of Ireland under the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig and the Glens from the 15<sup>th</sup> century; the arrival of the Cawdor Campbells in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Shawfield Campbells in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; not to mention the subsequent well-documented phases of population expansion, retraction, clearance and settlement redistribution,<sup>72</sup> it is also likely that many of them are neologisms, which have replaced – or been adapted from Norse precursors.

### **What does all of this mean?**

Place-names have the capacity to preserve linguistic data like Jurassic flies trapped in amber even when their formative language milieu has undergone substantial change, decline or death. In an area like Islay, where several languages are known to have been used as sequential *linguae francae* over the centuries, the extraction and classification of this data points to a shift from Gaelic to Old Norse and then back to Gaelic again, albeit of a different variety with strong evidence for an Old Norse substrate.<sup>73</sup> Closer analysis of the name material in its topographical, economic and social contexts hints at the relative social status of the user groups of those languages. The survival of so many Norse

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<sup>71</sup> Watson 1904, xl-xli; Cox 2002, 111-24; Macniven 2015, 181-2, 273-4.

<sup>72</sup> Macniven 2015: 21-6.

<sup>73</sup> Stewart 2004.

names *in situ* covering both settlements and natural features indicates that long-standing native Gaelic traditions were cast aside by Norse settlers. It also suggests that the new traditions introduced by them gained enough acceptance to become implanted in the landscape and preserved until their original meanings had been forgotten probably, and faced with linguistic change accelerated by new waves of prestigious Gaelic speaking immigrants, required topographical clarification. Although the ratio of Old Norse to Gaelic names in Islay is relatively small in absolute terms,<sup>74</sup> it is nevertheless of key significance that the Norse material is spread across the whole island, and not restricted to discrete parts of it. With historical place-names most often coined by the neighbours of a site, and preserved most effectively by the wider communities or user groups, it must be assumed that the Old Norse became the main language of communication during the Viking Age. For this to have happened without any clear examples of ancient Gaelic names with Old Norse epexegetic onomastic units, points to disjuncture in culture and probably also population at the beginning of the Norse period, but a gradual and largely peaceful transition at the other end. From these observations alone it seems reasonable to conclude that the assumed North-South divide in Viking activity is more illusory than real – a reflex of changing circumstances in and around the Irish Sea, the far earlier re-alignment of the Inner Isles to regional ethnic and political norms than their neighbours in the North, and subsequent radical changes in population distribution. And if this degree of change was possible in such a politically and strategically ‘central’ place as Islay, it is hard to believe that the same was not also true of the smaller islands nearby. Further research with this possibility in mind is likely to yield interesting results.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> MACniven 2015, 20-22.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, John Holliday’s survey of Tiree place-names, available online at <http://www.tireeplacenames.org/>, accessed 30 May 2016.

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